

Causal Attributions: Phenomenological and Dialectical Aspects

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The theory of causal attribution is examined within a phenomenological/dialectical framework. It is suggested that causal attributions be seen as dynamic, evolving processes which encompass a constant interplay of chance versus causal notions expressed in the subjects' decisionary process. A modification of the unified causal scheme imposed by attribution theorists on the explanation of behavior is proposed which considers the subjects' intentionality in the constitution of meaningful explanations within a social context. The 'reason-cause' distinction is, thus, given primary importance. Furthermore, it is suggested that the dichotomy between dispositional and situational factors be substituted by a dynamic, dialectic interplay between these factors aiming at the construction of social meaning.

It is our intention in this paper to discuss certain aspects of the growing interest in conceptions of dialectical method (Basseches, 1980; Baumgardner, 1977; Buck-Morss, 1977; Cvetkovich, 1977; Georgoudi, 1983b; Gergen, 1977; Israel, 1979; Riegel, 1979; Smith, 1977) and in the possibilities of a phenomenological approach toward attribution theory (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1973; Spurling, 1977; Walsh, 1979). More particularly, our goal is to indicate how a theorist's sensitivity to the dialectic and to certain ways of describing human beings phenomenologically, can supplement the traditional experiment particularly in the study of causal attributions made in a social context.

Dialectics in Social Psychology

Mortimer Adler (1927) made three major distinctions in the way one could utilize the dialectic. Dialectic can be a part of an argument designed to discover the first principles of existence (metaphysics). Dialectic as a manner of defining and analyzing a variety of problems can be placed for consideration in the realm of logic, and is usually juxtaposed with demonstrative reasoning. Dialectic as a description of certain aspects of human experience apparent

from reasoning can exist in the realm of explanation of human behaviors other than reasoning.

The use to which the psychologist can put the dialectic disallows for any precise separation between the empirical and logical meanings of the process, since dialectic as logic necessarily implies interpretations of some human activity, besides reasoning, as dialectic in nature. The standard conception of dialectic logic is that meaning and truth are discovered by considering an idea with its opposite to develop a synthesis which represents a level of truth or meaning superior to the thesis or antithesis preceding it. Presumably, the opposition of ideas reveals insights into the issue at hand not before apparent. Dialectic logic is often considered as an alternative to demonstrative logic, which is reasoning from known truths and then extracting or deducing propositions already contained in the known truths. Much modern scientific theoretical construction utilizes the demonstrative form.

Recently, dialectics has been employed quite extensively in social psychological articles (Baumgardner, 1977; Buss, 1979; Georgoudi, 1983b; Gergen, 1977; Israel, 1979; Kvale, 1976; Smith, 1977). Georgoudi (1983b), for example, in discussing some of the basic characteristics of dialectics, points out the following features: a) dialectics is concerned with relationships that can be called contradictory. That is, the entities that stand in such a relationship express opposites or contradictions that become intelligible only in relation to each other (e.g., master-servant, capitalist-proletarian); b) dialectics examines phenomena as they are intrinsically related. Since the relations that dialectics examines are contradictory, the relata do not stand separate from each other, i.e., do not assume an independent existence or meaning from each other, but become meaningful only in their interconnection; c) dialectics focuses on processes, developments, and transformations, rather than on static events. These changes or transformations are qualitative, not additive and, therefore, not subsumable under a linear model of development; d) dialectics examines phenomena within the social and historical context in which they emerge; and e) dialectics opposes all dualisms in the sense of a strict separation between knower-know, and consequently accepts the social scientist, not as an independent observer, but as being intimately involved with the phenomena that he or she examines.

Thus, dialectic theorizing involves assumptions about human activity which are fundamentally different from those of the positivist tradition. For example, in the construction of an experiment where independent variables are manipulated in order to examine their systematic effect on a dependent variable, we typically set the null hypothesis as a kind of opposite effect to the one that we expect. Should we accept the experimental hypothesis, we proceed on the assumption that the effect shown is meaningful in guiding us in being able to predict and perhaps to understand, through theory, some bit of human activity. Should we reject the experimental hypothesis and accept the

null hypothesis, we conclude not that the theory from which we have derived our experimental hypothesis is incorrect, but rather that it has not been supported in this instance. If one proceeds by performing one experiment after the other, all hypotheses will be abandoned save the one supported by the study. In short, the form of a typical experiment disallows the consideration of opposite hypotheses being confirmed at the same time in the same organism. This confinement to the acceptance of successive hypotheses while eliminating their opposites (or the null), can give one good and useful information, but eliminates the possibility of discovering that opposite conditions may exist at the same time in the same organism. In other words, the experiment slices through human activity and attempts to freeze it in order to control and examine a portion of it. Changes, and particularly conflicts in time, constitute the subject matter of a dialectical analysis. The dialectician must allow for opposite and competing tendencies in the subject as they occur naturally. In this sense the dialectic method is not a substitute for an experiment, but is rather a complement to it. Clearly, it has not the precision or cutting edge of a well constructed experiment, but it can frame a problem in a more meaningful way. Consequently, empirical investigation cannot be substituted for by dialectical analysis. The latter is more an attitude which encompasses the form and execution of empirical analysis but which recognizes the centrality of subjective conflict in the social context.

Causal Explanation in Attribution Theory

In the study of causal attributions, the researcher typically suspends a particular instant in an individual's life and tries, through contingent analyses, to discover the antecedent situational or psychological conditions that determine the making of a causal attribution. Attribution theorists (Heider, 1980; Jones and Nisbett, 1971; Kelley, 1971, 1980; Monson and Snyder, 1977; Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Wortman, 1976) have tended to project an exclusively causal framework onto the lay explanation of behavior. The implicit assumption that has guided research in this area is that the layperson explains behavior in exclusively causal terms (Buss, 1978). It is, thus, assumed that attributional effort will be applied even to the most normative, rule-bound actions and events; furthermore, causal attributions are assumed to be part of each individual's cognition, rather than reflecting a socio-cultural system guiding the perception of actions and events (Antaki, 1981; Semin, 1980). Generally, the model of the layperson construed by attribution theorists (Harvey, Ickes, and Kidd, 1976; Kelley, 1973, 1980) is that of 'man as scientist' who tries to explain, predict and control behavior based on a cause-effect evaluation of events. Attribution theorists (Harvey, et al., 1976; Kelley, 1971, 1973, 1980; Wimer and Kelley, 1982) have done a good job of examining causal explanations among people when they do occur. The question becomes

whether explanations of various phenomena by lay individuals always, or even frequently, are made on a causal basis.

Human intentional actions cannot be accounted for in the same manner as are natural, non-human events (cf. Brenner, 1980; Gergen and Gergen, 1982; Pettit, 1976; Shotter, 1980). That is, what appear to be 'causal' statements (in the strict Humean sense) in human intentional actions, are justifications of intentions which cannot be treated as causal inferences derived from behavior. As Spurling (1977) has argued, the connection between action and motive (or intention) is not causal (which would necessitate conceiving the two to be separate and independent of each other), but conceptual and logical. The link between intention and action is internal in the sense that the intention is "an interpretation of the action, or a specification of what the action in fact is" (p. 83). Along similar lines, Merleau-Ponty (1973) has argued that an experience is not externally related to the motives that explain it and that the necessary conditions for an experience are never sufficient to produce it (in the strict causal sense of 'if A, then B'). For example, the death of a friend is not a *sufficient* condition to produce one's particular experience of sadness (e.g., one may become garrulous); one would not put the experience (sadness) and the condition (death) in a one-to-one causal relation. Rather, one would see the experience as involving much more, i.e., one's particular *mode* of understanding the world (Morrison, 1979).

Reasons and intentions can be supplementary to a genuine causal analysis without confusing one with the other (Lana, 1969). Winch (1958, p. 81) has written:

Suppose that N, a university lecturer, says that he is going to cancel his next week's lectures because he intends to travel to London: here we have a statement of intention for which a reason is given. Now N does not *infer* his intention of cancelling his lectures from his desire to go to London, as the imminent shattering of the glass might be inferred, either from the fact that someone had thrown a stone or from the brittleness of the glass. N does not offer his reason as *evidence* for the soundness of his prediction about his future behavior. Rather, he is justifying his intention. His statement is not of the form: "Such and such causal factors are present, therefore this will result"; nor yet of the form: "I have such and such a disposition, which will result in my doing this"; it is of the form: "In view of such and such considerations this will be a reasonable thing to do."

A supplementary analysis can be made that emphasizes possible causal components in Winch's scenario. That is, even though Professor N reasons to himself in such a manner, he may be passive in the face of various environmental and physiological contingencies, resulting not only in his actual behavior, but in his verbal explanation of why he behaves the way he does. Although Professor N may not entertain a causal sequence in coming to his decision, an examination of his past life might lead one to predict the exact course of events which occurred and, also, N's articulated reasons for doing what he did. A causal analysis might have indicated a simpler more accurate set of contingen-

cies allowing for greater prediction of his behavior, verbal or otherwise.

If we re-examine Winch's example, Professor N might have argued as follows: "If I intend to go to London next week, and I must assuredly do so, then I absolutely must cancel my lectures. Thus, it is physically impossible for me to be in two places at the same time and, although I would like to attend my lecture, my London trip takes precedence. I therefore do infer (i.e., it follows causally) that I cannot be at my lecture next week and in London at the same time." The point is that the impossibility of being in two places at once is implied by Professor N's statement of intention. In no way is the causal analysis superior or inferior to the "reason" analysis. They are simply conceptually different. Difficulty arises for the theorist when the possibility of one argument or the other systematically, intentionally, or accidentally is eliminated from consideration when social phenomena are to be explained.

Buss (1978) has correctly understood that the history of psychological theory in America has developed in such a manner as to emphasize the causal and, therefore, contingent variables in explaining human activity. The focus on behavior by many American psychologists in the twentieth century required that concepts irredeemably non-behavioral, such as consciousness, reason, and intention, be eliminated from the lexicon of psychology. Buss has made clear the necessity of distinguishing between causes and reasons as an aid in understanding the processes involved in making attributions. Specifically his argument is as follows: The making of an attribution involves more than making a causal attribution. Most attribution theorists have assumed that the attributions that people make are exclusively causal. Buss indicates that there is a class of attributions which are more properly described as "reasons for which a change is brought about" and are associated with intentional actions. Causes are that which bring about a change and are associated with occurrences, i.e., unintentional events that happen to the actor and which he/she passively suffers.

The reason-cause distinction, as advocated by Buss (1978), has caused some theorists (Harvey and Tucker, 1979) to criticize him for providing inadequate criteria for the categorization of events as actions (associated with reasons) versus occurrences (associated with causes), and others (Kruglanski, 1979) to assert that the reason-cause distinction is not necessary and crucial since intentions can be seen as causing actions. Kruglanski has argued that reason represents only one type of possible explanation whereas cause is more inclusive in that it incorporates and can be applied to different types of explanations. Still other theorists (e.g., Lalljee, 1981) have maintained that causal and intentional explanations are functionally independent and that the exclusive causal scheme imposed on explanations needs to be substituted for by a model which includes a multiplicity of explanations. Finally, other theorists (Pettit, 1976, 1981) have argued that if intentions are to be defined as goal-directed forces, then they function as causes for action, even though

these theorists have remained uncertain as to the exact kind of relation that intention and action represent. Pettit (1976) has maintained that there are always reasons for pursuing particular goals and reasons for not pursuing them, and that it is when we are unclear as to why the actor pursued a particular goal that we need to mention the actor's intentions.

Kruglanski's and Pettit's criticisms of Buss's cause-reason distinction attempt to reduce intentions and reasons to a sub-species of cause when they conclude that intentions "cause" actions. Without reiterating Winch's and other's arguments concerning the reason-cause distinction, it is sufficient to indicate that this blurring of differences between cause and reason serves to minimize a useful perception of the manner in which human reaction *sometimes* differs from the reaction of inanimate objects. In any case, most theorists would probably agree that the exclusive use of causality (in the Humean sense) is an extremely restrictive notion in the analysis of human intentional actions; the question arises as to how these actions can be examined.

What is needed is a concept that preserves a sense of orderly explanation of intentions and motives, but which avoids the pitfalls of classic causal analysis applied to human intentions. One possibility has been proposed by Walsh (1979) with his notion of *causal efficacy*, i.e., causality simply as efficacious influence exerted and received.

Causal efficacy is something other than a theory of causality designed to facilitate inquiry. It is an existential notion, a notion acquired not because of a particular theory of causality, but because we directly participate in the world as active agents. For example, we not only exert an efficacious influence on the natural world (e.g., our effort to move forward against the wind) but also experience or receive its efficacious power (e.g., the wind holding us back). Similarly, in a social situation we may experience the favor asked by a friend as an efficacious influence upon our actions. Thus, in saying that "his astute argument caused me to change my mind," we are not making metaphysical, causal statements, but rather expressing this efficacious influence. That is, although there are not different *kinds* of species of causes that apply to natural versus social events, these events do involve different entities, the nature of which has to be taken into consideration if a causal explanation is undertaken.

One cannot explain natural events (e.g., a volcanic eruption) by invoking intentions, but one must consider beliefs, motives, and intentions in explaining certain human actions. The concept of causal efficacy simply points to (a) the fact that not every statement including the word "cause" can be treated as causal, (b) that in explaining events, different things have to be taken into account, depending on the entities involved, and (c) that, in this sense, a causal analysis does not necessitate the adoption of a particular methodology (e.g., causal explanation) applied to the examination of natural phenomena (Walsh, 1979). As many have concluded (Buss, 1978; Peters, 1958; Winch, 1958), attributions made concerning social, purposeful events, although

sometimes containing the term "cause," are really explanations involving reasons (means and ends, plans, purpose).

Causal Attributions as a Dialectical Process

In attribution research, it has been argued (Kelley, 1973; Wortman, 1976) that people make causal attributions in an attempt to maintain a feeling of control in the world. If an accident is attributed to specific situational factors or dispositional factors of the victim, it is less likely that we will perceive ourselves as future "candidates." If the accident is attributed to chance, then there is nothing we can do to prevent ourselves from being the victim in another "uncontrollable" situation, i.e., we cannot avoid our own victimization. This theory is closely related to Lerner's (1975) and Walster's (1966) "just world hypothesis." That is, individuals are motivated to believe in a just world where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Walster has found that a person's desire to avoid victimization influences not only the causal attributions he or she makes, but the tendency to punish those who cause accidents. Thus, if the results of an accident—or any event for that matter—are positive, either the recipients are seen as meritorious, or the event is attributed to chance thus allowing the attributor to believe that he or she may be a candidate for a similar positive accident in the future. If, however, the results are negative, then not only the recipient's characteristics are degraded, but the outcome is attributed to specific situational or dispositional factors to make certain that we exclude ourselves from being the recipients of such outcomes in the future. In life, in contrast to the setting provided by laboratory studies, outcomes are rarely clearly due to chance or caused by easily identifiable factors. Thus, no one, trained or not, can easily separate the various events associated with an accident into either chance or causal categories. If someone crosses a street against the traffic signal and is struck by an automobile, a causative explanation of the event is possible, but chance can play a role since people who cross against the traffic signal are not invariably or even frequently struck by automobiles. Regardless of whether people make causal or chance attributions on a logically and evidentiary secure basis, the fact that they make them at all is of great social significance. The crucial problem for the attribution researcher is not under what conditions an individual makes attributions, although that is of interest, but rather how attributions change and develop in an individual and how this development characterizes the decisionary process in the social situation (cf. Georgoudi, 1983a, 1983b; Lalljee, Watson, and White, 1982; Semin, 1980).

Action and thought are dialectical processes and what one makes out of one's life, that which one derives from one's experience, is the product of the fusion of the dialectical oppositions of life (e.g., absurdity versus meaning, causality versus chance). For example, an event or an outcome is often both

negative and positive involving both causality and chance (e.g., winning at poker); discovering the event's significance for the individual requires that one go beyond a contingent analysis and most importantly come to understand the particular meaning given to it by the individual. For example, attribution researchers (Jones and Nisbett, 1971) have found that actors attribute their actions to situational factors while observers attribute the same actions to the personal dispositions of the actor. In such experiments, observers are usually instructed to pay attention to the actor while the latter is unaware of the observers.

Buss has argued that actors attribute their actions to situational requirements because they are attempting to justify and explain these actions. Observers attribute the same actions to dispositions because they are "outside" of the action and can attribute causal influences which are presumably operating on the actor. The two explanations are not of the same logical type (see Buss, 1978 for details). Error in the observer's analysis is more easily checked than in the actor's. The observer's causal analysis of the actor's behavior, because it is causal, is subject to an empirical demonstration of truth or falsity no matter how difficult such an experiment might be to construct. On the contrary, the actor's reasons for his or her actions are not subject to the same type of analysis. However, the actor's reason is still of a logically different order than the analysis of the causes of the behavior. In short, something may be happening to the actor of which he or she is not aware, and which may influence behavior. Once the actor is made aware of this influence he or she may modify his or her reasons for acting; but they remain reasons, not causes. However, if the actor is self-deceptive or irrational, then there may be other internal events operating which better explain the behavior than the "reasons" previously given.

The dialectic quality of the cause-reason distinction applied to a set of events is apparent in that both types of explanation can be made about any series of events. Yet, the fullest description of these events is best made by an emerging synthesis yielded by the conflict between them.

Attribution researchers (Harvey, Ickes, and Kidd, 1976; Jones and Nisbett, 1971; Kelley, 1971, 1973, 1980) have drawn a clear distinction between internal stable loci of causality, and external, contingent loci of causality, establishing the two as logically separate and distinct categories. Recently, this view has come under attack by theorists (e.g., Gergen and Gergen, 1980, 1982; Lalljee, 1981; Lalljee, Watson, and White, 1982; Monson and Snyder, 1977; Semin, 1980) who argued that situational-dispositional explanations are not really dichotomous, but rather complementary causal forces, and that this distinction represents a semantic pseudo-dichotomy imposed by the scientist on the subjects' explanations. Lalljee, Watson, and White (1982), for example, have argued that the inclusion of both dispositional and situational factors in the explanation of an event will depend on the complexity of the explanation

offered, and that the explanation of unexpected and unfamiliar events is more likely to include both factors than the explanation of expected and familiar events. Lalljee (1981) has also maintained that a dispositional explanation might be offered to one listener and a situational explanation to another depending on the subject's assumptions about the listener's knowledge of the event.

Even though these arguments furnish a welcome advance over the more restrictive use of dispositional-situational factors as mutually exclusive categories, the dialectic position emphasizes the juxtaposition and interrelatedness of these factors as an essential characteristic of the attributional process. In other words, situational and dispositional factors are not independent of each other but rather are intrinsically related and mutually transformed in the process of social explanation. In a recent study by Georgoudi (1983b), it was shown that subjects can use both dispositional and situational factors in the explanation of a *single* event and that the perceived degree of contribution of each factor depends on the type of situation or event examined (e.g., accident, occurrence, coincidence). Furthermore, a descriptive, qualitative analysis of the subjects' written accounts of their explanations revealed that when subjects were exhibiting a dialectical form of thinking, dispositional and situational factors were equally emphasized. That is, subjects were juxtaposing possible situational and dispositional factors that contributed to the outcome of the event and, in considering their mutual or synthetic influence, they arrived at different attributions in a continuously evolving process of explaining the event. In this sense, their attributions did not represent static and absolute ascriptions of causality to the events examined; rather, they represented transformative and developmental instances of their efforts to explain the event in a meaningful way.

Conclusions

The lay perception of causality is more complicated than would appear in much attribution research. Individual's use of the term "cause" is not necessarily reflective of the meaning they intend in making an attribution. The cause-reason distinction described by Buss (1978), Peters (1958), and Winch (1958) is a more accurate description of the processes involved in making an attribution than previously had been made by attribution researchers (e.g., Jones and Nisbett, 1971; Walster, 1966). To conclude that reason or intention are one form of cause is not useful since one is then burdened with distinguishing between a "reason" cause and one that does not include reason or intention as part of its character (e.g., as gas is "caused" to expand by the application of heat).

The social attributive construction of reality involves a dialectical process between the individual and the external world through which meaning is

constituted. The human subject is an intentional agent embedded within—and simultaneously constituting—social meaning.

Meaning is given to the world by human beings as they live in it. If this were not the case discourse on these issues would be impossible. Hence, we are intending, reasoning, causing and being caused by existing in a constant dialectic interplay with the world.

This dialectic process itself is neither a method nor a technique for solving problems, but rather a reflection of an individual's being and becoming in the world. In short, the dialectic is a reasonable way to describe the way human beings function in attributing meaning to the world. Conceivably, what attribution theorists are studying is the attribution of meaning to events rather than studying the attribution of cause or chance to these events.

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